

Plus

Today's Lesson: Watergate

What Do Kids Know & How'd They Learn It?

By Laura Blumenfeld
Washington Post Staff Writer

Watergate. Heard of it? Not these students, whose eyes are suddenly as dull as the cement wall they're sitting on outside the District's Wilson Senior High School.

Watergate. You know, the worst political scandal in American history?

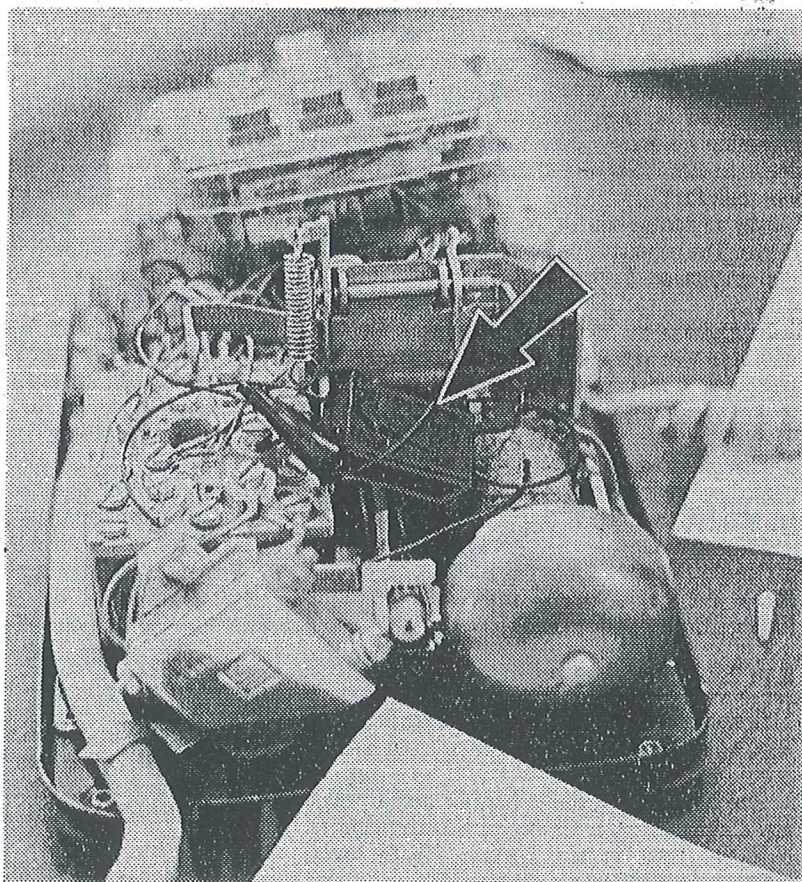
"American history?" Delrica Austin, 17, asks suspiciously.

"I remember!" says Taunya Artisst, a junior. "Leonard and Bernstein—they thought something was a burglary and then realized it was the president. They wrote a book about it, 'All the King's Men.'"

"I wish I took that class," says Rebecca Altes, a senior.

"Don't know much else," Artisst concedes. "We just memorized: Leonard and Bernstein. Leonard and Bernstein."

Bob Woodward isn't the only sock lost in the Watergate wash. Asked



MCGOVERN STAFF PHOTO BY TOMMY NOONAN

One of the telephones that was bugged (arrow) during the Watergate break-in.

about Richard Nixon's role, Luis Rosales, 18, says: "Did he have something to do with it?" For many teenagers born around the time Watergate unraveled, the affair seems as irrelevant as the Teapot Dome scandal. It's a fill-in-the-blank on a history test, a list of obscure names to cram and then to promptly forget.

District students learn about Watergate in 11th grade, as part of a four-week unit called "Challenges at Home and Abroad," says Edna Pearson, supervising director for social studies. The unit also covers U.S. policy on Cuba and the impact of the nuclear age on foreign policy. The curriculum guide asks students to develop a chronology of events that led to Nixon's downfall, to write an essay on how the separation of powers influenced events, and to explain the impeachment function of Congress.

Now ask 11th graders how Watergate is taught.

"We glossed over it in class," says Jennifer Crescenzo, a junior. "No one read the chapter."

"We'll never get up to it," says Arpad Danos, 11th grade. "We've been lost, babbling about farms for two months now."

Will Dalrymple, a junior in an advanced-placement history class: "We skipped over it. We knew it wouldn't be on the AP exam."

What Is Watergate?

Among the teenagers littering the Wilson high schoolyard, a few have a sketchy sense of Watergate. Then there's the rare Antonio Deguzman, an 11th-grade history wizard, who rattles off the entire cast: District Court Judge John Sirica, special prosecutor Archibald Cox, CRP, the Committee for the Re-Election of the President. ("I got extra credit for CRP!") As for the rest of the students...

"No idea," says Theresa Bohannon, ninth-grade. "My crusty mother—she's old, she's 45—she would remember."

"I basically know nothing about it," says Austin Lear, 11th grade. "Except for 'Family Ties' had this episode where Valerie cheated on her test and they mentioned it. . . . Um, I watch a lot of TV."

Never mind the 1972 electronic bugging of the Democratic National Committee offices. Watergate refers to Richard Nixon spying on John F. Kennedy, according to Andrea Dillard, 10th grade. It was the break-in at Eugene McCarthy's campaign office in California, says Alex Brown, 11th grade.

"Watergate?" says Leisa Tonauf, 10th grade. "The one in Virginia?"

"Nixon unplugged his answering machine for, like 20 minutes," says Brian Ellsworth, 10th grade.

"All I know," says Keegan Musgrove-Wesley, 10th grade, "is, it was on the front page of The Washington Post a long, long time ago. Like four or five years."

How Was Nixon Caught?

"The Pentagon Papers?" says Annan LeMon, a junior. "Or am I really off?"

Bryan Johnson, 12th grade: "His friends set him up."

"Quayle," says Deilert Lora, a senior. "No wait. It must have been Carter."

"The FBI," says Brian Combs, 12th grade. "Or the CIA. One of those three-letter things—NBC?" Combs recognizes Nixon because he saw the Patrick Swayze film, "Point Break." A man wore a Nixon mask while robbing a bank. Combs observes: "Nixon had a big nose."

Woodward and Bernstein?

"Did they tape Nixon?" says Combs. "Woodward and Lothrop?" says Elizabeth Stevenson, 10th grade.

And Bernstein.

"Sounds like a historical pact," Stevenson guesses.

Sarah Brodsky, 11th grade: "They

exposed the security guard who left tape on the door."

"They were top politicians," says Luis Rosales, a senior, "who were involved in the scheme to break in."

More Trivia

The plumbers, Nixon's Special Investigations unit to stop news leaks, were "a doo-wop revival group" guesses Allison Shook, a sophomore. They were "crooks who pretended they were plumbers," says Combs.

Former U.S. Attorney John Mitchell? No takers. They knew Paul Mitchell hair products.

"Wait, Yes!" says Stevenson. "We did an essay on Mitchell."

"No," moans Jules Cohen, a sophomore. "That was Wallace. Another guy we don't care about."

Spiro Agnew? "The name's familiar," says Shook. "Did Tony Kornheiser just write about him?" Her friends stare silently. She backpedals: "I honestly, don't, really, read."

"I know Acme, not Agnew," says Brian Crockett, 12th grade. "On the Wile E. Coyote cartoon."

As to the impact of Watergate on American society, Rosales sums it up: "People are more unsure of who to support. You can't trust politicians like Woodward and Bernstein."

Enough. Give these kids a break. Watergate went down too recently to study it, too long ago to remember it.

"It happened during that nonexistent point between history and current events," says Jocelyn Powers, 11th grade.

Good point. How could they be expected to know about anything from way back in 1972?

"1972?" says Cohen, perking up. "Fourth Led Zeppelin album came out."

"Aerosmith was formed," chimes Ellsworth.

Cohen: "Hendrix had been dead for two years and Morrison was . . ."